

Jonathan Moore

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U.S. Response to Southern African Refugee Crisis



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Following is an address by Ambassador Jonathan Moore, U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, before the Conference on Southern African Refugees, Returnees, and Displaced Persons, Oslo, Norway, August 23, 1988.

Opening the 1979 Arusha conference on the situation of refugees in Africa, [then-President of Tanzania] Julius Nyerere proclaimed:

This conference is about people; about the prospects, and indeed the very life of people who are now, or may in future be, forced to flee from their homelands and seek refuge in another country in order to escape persecution, or death, or starvation. . . . This conference has to face up to the implications of our common humanity with these millions of souls. They are victims of forces beyond their control: It could happen to any of us. The manner in which they now unavoidably look to us for succor may be the way we ourselves will tomorrow be looking to others.

These words ring true today as we consider the plight of the more than 5 million refugees and displaced persons of southern Africa. Their suffering and the dangerous instability of the southern African region demand the highest priority attention and the best concerted efforts of the international community. The U.S. delegation is, therefore, proud to associate itself with this conference and its goals: The solidarity of the spirit and the rehabilitation of the society.

It is singularly fitting that our consultations about these tragic refugee problems are taking place in Norway. The contributions of the Government and people of Norway on behalf of refugees are beacons of sacrifice, dedication, and generosity. Norwegians lead the entire world in their contributions,

per capita and as a percentage of GNP [gross national product], to the international organizations which protect and assist refugees.

Norway's legendary native son, Fridtjof Nansen, formulated the ideals and established the structures of international refugee assistance as the first commissioner for refugees. The memory of Nansen's tireless entreaties to governments and individuals to assist refugees earlier in this century still lives everywhere. The United Nations and its partners work to help desperate people.

To the Government of Norway, the Organization of African Unity, the United Nations, and to all who have worked to provide this forum on behalf of the helpless victims in southern Africa, I wish to express our heartfelt thanks.

The Situation in Southern Africa

It is indeed an indictment of our age that once again we must meet to try to recover the lives of a vast group of refugees and displaced persons. We have come together because of our shared concern for the tragic conditions of the refugees in southern Africa. We are bound by our common anguish about the suffering and deprivation which so many of these refugees and displaced persons have endured; and all of us feel a common revulsion to the cruelties perpetrated against innocent people. We join in common purpose to save the refugees and to aid them in their search for productive lives with dignity and justice.

The causes of the immense suffering in southern Africa are well known. Injustice, poverty, violence, natural disasters, and the repressive, intolerable policy of apartheid in South Africa have spawned conditions which are echoed in the tragedies of Indochina, South Asia, and the Horn. In such a world, we might become inured to a seemingly endless succession of transgressions, but if we turned our backs on the vulnerable and needy, we would lose the pulse of our own humanity.

During 1987, refugee numbers increased dramatically in southern Africa. I traveled to the region in March of that year and was alarmed by the large groups of Mozambicans who were displaced in Mozambique or dispersed as refugees in Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and South Africa. Subsequently, as these flows continued, I commissioned a study in order to learn more about their causes, which was completed earlier this year.

What emerged from the interviews with Mozambican refugees and displaced persons was a consistently horrifying account of the most appalling brutality. Copies of the report are available here today. I commend it to your reading. The cries of RENAMO's [Mozambique National Resistance Movement] victims implore us to act.

It is a godsend that so many Mozambicans have found refuge in the other countries of southern Africa. We salute this extraordinary hospitality, which, unfortunately, is not matched in all areas of the world. Many African nations with lower per capita GNP, higher ratio of refugees to indigenous population, and less foreign assistance, nevertheless, preserve first asylum more faithfully than other nation states

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which are better off in all categories. We recognize that the burden grows heavier, but we urge Africans and their governments to continue their profound traditions of refuge and sharing. We pledge our continued strong support for these efforts, which illuminate man's capacity for spiritual as well as physical survival.

As a nation of refugees and immigrants, the people of the United States are profoundly moved by the ordeal of those forced to flee their homes. Americans have consistently reached out to share the burden of refugees, returnees, and displaced persons through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Food Program, UNICEF [UN Children's Fund], and the courageous private voluntary organizations.

Since 1980, the United States has provided over \$1 billion in development assistance to the countries of southern Africa to help ameliorate the poverty that can cause conditions of refugee flows and displacement—including \$25 million per year in legal and other assistance to the victims of apartheid within South Africa. Our humanitarian assistance to refugees in southern Africa has amounted to another \$300 million since 1980. I am most pleased to announce today an immediate further emergency contribution of \$10.5 million in refugee-related help. Of this total, \$5.5 million will be in response to the urgent appeals by ICRC for its African programs. The balance of \$5 million will be contributed to UNHCR for Mozambican refugees and for refugees in the Horn. There must be more help from us, and there will be, because these commitments are not fleeting but lie deep in the hearts of the American people.

Material resources alone cannot help anyone if the available assistance fails to reach the refugees. Unfortunately, there are situations where the international organizations are hindered in fulfilling their mandates to help all refugees, regardless of their original nationalities and regardless of where they are. We are concerned about excessively narrow definitions of security that deny safety and help to innocent civilians and insist on categorizing people as either supporters or enemies, and we are troubled about politically motivated efforts to prevent international organizations from helping some refugees because of who or where they are. Neutrality, which is so fundamental to the provision of international humanitarian assistance, is in jeopardy. Extremely important ideals, which nur-

ture the worldwide mechanisms by which refugees are helped and protected, may be crippled and compromised. Denying humanitarian assistance as a weapon of war is an unjustifiable practice, which must not be used by any party to conflict.

The conference sponsors have reminded us that this is not the first time we have come together to discuss the plight of African refugees and returnees and the social, economic, and ecological burdens that they pose for their host countries. In 1984, at the second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa, we all agreed that integrating refugee relief assistance with development aid was key to finding truly lasting solutions in areas of high refugee impact. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to separate the two where refugees and nationals use the same systems providing health care, education, and other essential social services. In this connection, the recent meeting of the World Bank's consultative group on Malawi rightly focused on both long-term development issues and the immediate impact of the 600,000 Mozambican refugees on the Malawian economy.

Since every country in southern Africa shares the experience of having hosted refugees, it may be that new regional approaches to refugees and development would be fruitful. In this regard, we would welcome SADCC [Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference] playing a greater role in serving as a coordinating conduit for donor assistance that links refugee aid and humanitarian assistance to the displaced with long-term development assistance.

Is there any reason to hope that the flows of refugees in southern Africa might soon stop? Can we hope that those who are presently refugees must soon be able to return home? The answers to these questions, of course, depend on the conditions in the refugees' home countries. In those places where violence, persecution, and the violation of basic rights occur, we should expect people to continue to see their hope for survival in crossing borders to escape such actions. And it is essential that the natural temptation to repatriate refugees prematurely be resisted until conditions which can sustain and protect life have been adequately restored, lest the tragedy be compounded and the cycle be repeated.

It is incumbent on all of us, as members of the human family, not only to bring to bear all possible effective resources to aid the victims but also to

address the problems which cause refugees to flee. In doing so, we must be prepared to see the competent international and regional organizations engage not only those governments and groups whose actions and policies we like. It will be imperative for channels to be open precisely to those who cause the conditions which drive people into exile.

Hopeful Signs

I am encouraged that there are hopeful signs amidst the evidence of distress. Even as we meet, another round of talks among the Governments of Angola, Cuba, and South Africa is about to begin, with the mediation of the United States. The cherished vision of independence for Namibia may soon become reality. Independence in Namibia will create other challenges as to how to facilitate repatriation, reintegration, and reconciliation. These are challenges which all of us will welcome.

So we recognize that southern Africa is experiencing a major emergency, in which the lives of millions of people are in grave danger, and that the potential exists there for a worse crisis in the years to come. The United States, in concert with other governments and with the international and regional organizations, will continue to support and strengthen a wide range of efforts to help southern Africa heal that emergency and avoid that crisis.

Exactly 25 years ago in his speech before the Lincoln Memorial, a great and sorely missed American political leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, espoused an ideal which ultimately answers the tragedy of southern Africa. That ideal is that there is no peace without justice. He said:

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. . . . Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. . . . We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. . . . Many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. . . .

May God bless us all with compassionate, dynamic, and fruitful endeavor. ■

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